

Proposal to  
The Institute for Modern Communications, Northwestern University  
McCoy Fund for Innovation Grants

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### The New Video Essay: An Emerging Form for Analysis and Presentation (Stage One)

Background: In the past five years a new video format has appeared. Produced largely by independent producers/makers, this form uses new and innovative techniques of organization and presentation to examine social issues. At present it occupies a peculiar space, too innovative to be accepted within the traditional film/video genre of the social issue documentary, and too grounded in communicating a relatively clear analysis of social/political issues to fit easily into the artworld avant garde. It is often marked by a concern for specific issues (such as homelessness, AIDS, militarization, the changing nature of the family and gender roles, the effects of mass culture, etc.) and the highly mediated public understanding we have of those issues. Using typical techniques of postmodernism such as collage, fragmentation, and appropriation, this new video work has been recognized with some recent exhibitions, but has not yet received a definitive name. "Editorial video," didactic, too parody, "illustrated video essay," "experimental documentary," "neo-journalism," and "deconstructed documentary" have been used so far.

Although there is not a term for the genre, a number of makers can be identified who have created a number of works: Sherry Millner, Martha Rosler, Aiyoka Chenzira, Vanalyne Greene, Marlon Riggs, Laura Kipnis (joining the RTF faculty this fall), and Steve Fagin are among the better known. Recently various commentators and critics, such as Russell Jacoby in *The Last Intellectuals: American Culture in the Age of Academe*, have deplored the apparent lack of "public intellectuals" in American life. While there may be some concern pertinent to traditional print culture, I believe that the critics often are blind to the distinct voices of emerging media culture intellectuals. In other words, the video essayists I propose to study are public intellectuals, addressing important issues of our time with vigor and sophistication, but have been under-recognized because they choose to work in the new area of video which in today's world potentially reaches a far more Public audience than most of literary oriented print culture.

### Issues addressed

At this stage of the research I am concerned with two fundamental questions. First, what are the general characteristics of this new video genre, particularly in terms of its form? (The content addressed varies from tape to tape, but I believe the general format configuration remains the same.) By studying a number of different works in terms of their formal structure and specific techniques, a good description of the genre should be obtained. This is a necessary first step for further conceptualization of the works and the issues raised. I expect to develop a general model which will be supplemented by student essays on specific works.

Second, how is this new form related to recent developments in the presentation of public information, particularly in terms of news and advertising. My hypothesis at this point is that this body of work is an attempt to "work from within" the norms and dominant practices of the contemporary "consciousness industries," while changing audience understanding of the media. In other words, rather than using a directly oppositional form (coded as, say, traditionally left-wing political or as avant garde experimental) these makers employ many of the techniques of current mass media--sound bite journalism, documentary re-enactment, highly directive narration--to raise points of view which do not appear in the mainstream. At the same time, they offer a critique (often satiric and comic) of how we receive information in our society.

The key question in the second area involves the understanding of postmodernism. Some culture critics arguing from both the right (e.g, art critic Hilton Kramer) and the left (e.g., literary critic Fredric Jameson) claim that postmodernism is not an oppositional stance for artists but one which capitulates to the (presumed) debased state of contemporary society. I disagree and believe that any media artist working today to communicate to large numbers of people must start with the common currency of current media culture rather than a nostalgia for a print culture past. The task then is to transform and innovate from the nature of current media, and theses video artists do so, ringing postmodern changes on the mass media experience of our world.

The fundamental question: "Is it possible to produce such work?" will be first answered at this stage through critical and qualitative analysis. In a further stage, the question becomes, "Does this body of work actually communicate in a



significantly different way?" That question must be answered with more empirical and ethnographic investigations of how these video texts are received. Research I prefer the term "expository video" which indicates the principal form of narration and address (like the expository literary essay) in contradistinction to the commonly recognized forms: dramatic narrative, social documentary, educational/training video, broadcast news, experimental/avant garde. While I agree that many examples of postmodernism are not effectively different from the taken-for-granted assumptions of our culture, that all postmodern techniques must invariably be simply affirmative of the current times. It is possible to produce video which itself carries on the traditional intellectual's task of challenging the received ideas of society in order to effect significant change for the better.

## Background literature

Because this project attempts to describe a still-emergent group of works, there is not a single article or monograph which describes the field of study. To date it has largely been the task of individual curators who have gathered together shows of recent video work who have recognized the phenomenon. The individual artists have received reviews and critical attention, but not within the general framework I am proposing here, of defining and explaining a new format for critical communication of social change.

Although these artists deal with different specific issues in different works, they all share one important conceptual concern. All of them use video to indicate the multiplicity of issues involved in any one topic, the plural voices and consciousnesses which must be recognized in adequately dealing with an issue. For example, Chenzira's *Silent Sounds Screaming* deals with child sexual abuse using interview excerpts and dramatic re-enactment interviews of those most directly concerned, particularly those who have experienced abuse. But rather than simply showing concern or horror at such criminal behavior and appealing to authority figures for solutions, the tape multiplies the levels of concern by presenting abuse victims who then become victimizers, children who must continue to live with their abusers, and so forth. The usual security of pat answers and cathartic conclusion is denied and the problem is shown as a very complicated and continuing one on emotional, physical, personal, and legal levels.

However this type of work does not typically present the "two distinct opposing points of view" so common in broadcast journalism. It often takes a distinct editorial position and clearly attempts persuasion; but it often does so less from a position of authority (unlike the endless stream of pundits on much tv issue programming such as *Nightline*), and more from a position of getting the audience to see an previously undisclosed side of things. For example, Sherry Millner and Ernie Larsen's *Scenes from the Microwar* takes a satiric look at the culture of militarism by showing a family which attempts to completely live out the fantasy lifestyle of *Soldier of Fortune* magazine. Moving from camouflage clothing and K-ration meals to boot camp discipline of the four-year old daughter, the piece undermines assumptions that military culture is "normal," but not by denouncing it but by showing it taken to its logical (and, from the videomaker's view, oppressive) conclusion.

## Research Methods, Project Administration, and Student Involvement

The research method will be to acquire a number of these videotapes which can be used for demonstration in classroom and for close analysis by the primary researcher and students. I assume that graduate students will be the most involved, but the materials will also be used in two C level courses and undergraduates may elect to write final papers which contribute to the project.

Specifically, the tapes will be used in the following courses taught by me in 1991-92.

RTF C23-1, Experimental Film. After showing some historical precursors such as work by Hans Richter and Dziga Vertov in the 1920s, and tracing some experimental expository work in the 50s and 60s (Sara Arledge, Bruce Baillie), several class meetings at the end of the course will deal with the emergence of a "counter cinema" in the work of Jean-Luc Godard and others. Video work will be shown to highlight the transition to video and students can do close studies of appropriate tapes.